

Chapter Sixteen -- Sunday-Go-to-Meetin'

"There's goin' to be a foot-washin' up at the head of the Cove, today," Mr. Burchfield told us.

Walter and Joel Hardigree and I were spending the weekend with the old man and his wife in Limestone Cove, though we'd never seen them a month before. But their children were all grown and gone, and they made us welcome, and we got awfully tired of the meals at summer school. It was sixteen miles, but we'd walk up on Saturday afternoon, and back the next one.

They lived on the bank of a creek that had good rainbow trout, and sometimes we fished a little. But mostly we just visited. And when we came they'd put the big pot in the little one, an' knock an egg in the head an' stew the dish-rag, as the sayin' goes. We'd eat sugar cured ham, an' chicken an' dumplins, an' hot biscuits with butter an' honey right out of the old man's hives.

"I don't know who's goin' to preach," Mr. Burchfield told us. "But if the sermon won't be worth hearin', the singin' will, an' the service is interestin'. I guess there's about as much scriptural warrant for foot-washin' as there is for the communion, far as that goes. You needn't worry about whether your socks are clean, for they won't wash your feet."

It was another good five miles up to the head of the Cove, too far for either one of the old folks. So as we went along,

we sang, an' told stories, an' just talked.

Joel told us about his favorite sermon, the one that just took one minute:

Brethren, my text this mornin' is from Job: "Man that is born of woman is of few days, an' full of trouble." I have divided my discourse into three parts: Man's ingress into this world; Man's progress through this world, an' Man's egress out of this world.

Man's ingress into this world is naked an' bare.

Man's progress through this world is trouble an' care.

Man's egress out of this world is nobody knows where.

To conclude: If you live well here, you'll live well there.

I could tell you no more if I talked a year.

We told him a few of the family tales, includin' the one about ^{how} Bob Patrick, a cousin of Father's, got made at Grandma Stafford, an' told somebody: "George Ann Stafford ain't got no more religion than my horse."

It was six months before she saw him, but Grandma never forgot anything. By the time they met, he'd got over his mad. She was just as friendly as could be when she met him, but she said: "Hello, Bob. How's your horse?" He was hacked mighty bad.

The church at the head of the Cove was a bare little place, big enough to hold ~~about~~ a hundred folks, an' pretty near full. It was a Free Will Baptist church, but the hymns sounded a lot like Hard-Shell, or Primitive Baptist, songs.

Main difference between the two is that Hard-Shells believe

in real stern predestination, an' even infant damnation. An old preacher we used to hear in Kentucky would shout:

"I tell you, my brethren, there are infants in Hell not a span long."

The Hard-Shells believe in an experience of grace, which means a conversion that hits you like a thunderbolt, an' say that you can't fall once you've been converted, which we used to call the doctrine of "once in grace, always in grace."

Free Wills are more like Methodists in their doctrine. They say if any man goes to Hell it's his own fault, an' that if you're saved you still have to watch out or you'll trip.

The preacher was a little man in yellow pants an' a gray coat, with a collar-band striped shirt, but no collar. He had a big Adam's apple, that went up an' down as he talked, an' made his collar button dance around.

He had one of the elders lead the singin' an' line out the hymns, though the congregation sang as if they knew 'em already. When you line out a hymn, you read a line, an' then the group sings it. They started out with an old favorite:

I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow,
 Alone in this wide world to roam.
 I have no hope for tomorrow,
 I try to make Heaven my home.
 Sometimes I'm tossed an' I'm driven,
 Sometimes I know not where to roam.
 I've heard of a city called Heaven;
 I've started to make it my home.

Then they sang a livelier one:

I don't like Old Satan, Old Satan don't like me,
Because I walk with Jesus, the Promised Land I see.

Hark, I'm goin' to land on shore
I'm goin' to land on shore,
Hark, I'm goin' to land on shore,
I'm goin' to shout for evermore.

They say that John the Baptist was nothing but a Jew,
But more than that I'll tell you, he was a preacher, too.

And after that the lovely:

Father, seek a home, in that new bright clime.
Oh, Father, seek a home, in that new bright clime.
Father seek a home, in that new bright clime.
Oh, Father, seek a home in Heaven.

By the grace of God, you may live always.
By the grace of God, you may live always.
By the grace of God, you may live always.
Oh, Father, seek a home in Heaven.

The first three lines of each verse climb in a stepped crescendo, with a long note at the middle and end of each line. Then on the fourth line the voice drops back down for a long, pleading, "Oh", and then pulses through the rest of the line, with heavy stresses on the first syllable of "father", "home", and the first syllable of "Heaven".

The sermon lasted nearly an hour, an' it must have come straight from the heart, for it hadn't been close to any books. Still it was interestin'.

His text was, "If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know the doctrine." An' he must have figured we didn't will it, for he proceeded to tell us the doctrine.

Somewhere along the way he stopped to pay his respects to Hard-Shells.

"Brethren," he said, "as I see it, the Primitive Baptist doctrine on religion is made up of three parts:

"If you want it, you can't get it.

"If you've got it, you don't know it.

"If you lose it, you never had it."

Nobody laughed, which wouldn't have been proper in meetin'. But I noticed some of the men up in the amen corner gave a pretty broad smile.

Along about three quarters of the way he got on Jesus washin' the disciples' feet, an' we figured the end must be gettin' close. He came in strong on bein' washed in the blood of the Lamb, an' wound up with "Whosoever will, let him come."

Nobody came up, though, when he gave the invitation, while they were singin':

I have a father in the Promised Land.

I have a father in the Promised Land.

An' I hope some day, we'll all get there,

Away over in the Promised Land.

Then they passed the communion bread an' wine, but it wasn't

offered to us, an' I think maybe they were "close communion", like other Baptists. Some of the Primitive Baptists, who also wash feet, were so close communion that they wouldn't even commune with members of other churches of their own faith.

The foot-washin' wasn't at all funny, as it may sound. We found it a very impressive service.

The only ones who took part were some of the older men, elders of the church, I suppose, an' the old women. Just in case any badly disposed person might have hoped for a glimpse of what he shouldn't see, the ladies who took part all formed a circle around the chairs set for the foot-washin', an' they had on such big Mother Hubbard dresses an' poke bonnets that you couldn't get a glimpse of what was goin' on. They were at one side of the church, the men on the other.

You could see the men wash feet, all right, an' somehow all my unregenerate desire to snicker just faded away, the sight was so solemn.

The man who was to wash the feet girded himself around the waist with a long towel -- so long that it hung down nearly to the floor at its long end. Then he poured clean water in a basin, an' knelt down with the end of the towel in his lap, before the man whose feet he was to wash.

One after the other he took off the shoes an' socks, an' took up water from the basin in his hand, an' rubbed it over the feet, an' then dried them with the towel, an' slipped the socks an' shoes back on.

Then those whose feet had been washed took towels an' the basins, an' washed the feet of the others. An' though they had

most of them walked to church on that dusty road, their feet were already the cleanest I ever saw in my life.

I'd always thought it was silly an' for show, but you couldn't believe it when you saw the serious, devout expression on their faces, an' saw how their eyes glowed as if they'd seen God.

Some of the old ladies shouted a little, an' several cried when they sang the closin' hymn:

Oh, when shall I see Jesus,
An' reign with him above?
An' drink the flowin' fountain,
Of everlastin' love?

I'm on my way to Canaan,
I'm on my way to Canaan,
I'm on my way to Canaan,
To the New Jerusalem.

We had to hurry off after the benediction, for we knew the old folks would wait dinner for us, an' we still had to get back to town. On the way we sang:

Yonder come the Methodists,
Down by the river.
Shoutin' in the wilderness,
Down by the river side.

We'll end this warfare,
Down by the river.
We'll end this warfare,
Down by the river side.

Yonder come the Baptists, too,
Down by the river.
They'll help us fight this battle through,
Down by the river side.

That was the last time I was in the Cove for nearly thirty years. When I got back not long ago, the Johnson City water-works owned the place where the Burchfields had lived, an' the house was gone, an' with it the big spring-house with its clear cold water, which never froze up, but was so cold even in summer they never needed ice.

There's an auto road runs up the Cove now, an' over into North Carolina, an' the Free Will Baptist church is gone, so far as I could see where it had been.

I stopped an' asked a man about the Burchfields. He scratched his head an' said he thought some people by that name used to live in the Cove, but that it was a long time ago.